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Application

For

United States Non-Provisional Utility Patent

Title:

Ranking-based Automatic Dark Compensation Circuit

Inventor:

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Ranking-Based Automatic Dark Compensation Circuit

Field of Invention

The invention relates to the field of microelectronic circuits in the image sensing
5 devices.

Background Information

In a CCD or CMOS image sensor, the optical dark level is usually non-zero and
needs to be subtracted from the normal ADC output level in order to obtain the true
signal level. To obtain appropriate estimate of this optical dark level, multiple samples at
10 various places in the sensor array are taken and assessed. The most commonly used
method is to perform an averaging operation on these samples, either using an analog
integration circuit or digital accumulator. However, if one or more of the sample points
is a defect pixel the averaged measurement will be biased and the entire image will either
become too dark or too bright. Defect pixels occur quite often in the sensor array and can
15 be the result of imperfect black filters, which causes light leak, or blooming due to
neighboring saturated pixels, among other things. The occurrence of defect pixels may
distort the estimated dark level enough to render the chip unusable.

Summary of the Invention

20 The invention eliminates the damaging effects of defect dark pixels associated
with averaging operations by choosing the k th smallest sample among n samples as the
estimation of the dark level. Thus, if there are defects among the n sample pixels that
result in abnormal dark values, these values will be excluded as long as they are lower or

higher than the k th smallest sample. In this manner, this circuit can always tolerate at least $k-1$ defects.

The invention implements the idea with a ranking-based dark compensation circuit. The ranking circuit comprises of k -stage staggered comparators, each comparator coupled to an associated temporary result register. Each comparator also having two inputs, with the first input coupled to an output of the previous stage comparator and the second input coupled to its associated temporary result register. The temporary results registers are initialized to be the largest possible dark value, and the samples are input into the circuit sequentially. At each stage, if the new sample is larger than the temporary result in the associated temporary result register of that comparator, the temporary result is not changed and the new sample is passed to the next comparator. If the new sample is smaller than that of the temporary result register, the new sample replaces the temporary result and the original temporary result becomes the new data passed to the next comparator. After all samples are processed, the temporary result of the last stage (k th stage) is the final estimated dark level and the output of the dark compensation circuit.

Brief Description of the Drawings

Figure 1 is a generalized schematic block diagram of the ranking-based automatic dark compensation circuit.

Figure 2 is a flow chart describing the process of the ranking-based automatic dark compensation circuit.

Figure 3 is a more detailed illustration of step 31 of the process of Fig. 2.

Detailed Description

Fig. 1 is a generalized schematic block diagram of the ranking circuit 10.

Ranking circuit 10 comprises of k -staggered comparators, C_1 through C_k . Each comparator is coupled to an associated temporary result register, labeled T_1 through T_k .

5 Each comparator comprises two inputs. The first input is coupled to receive an output of the previous comparator and the second input is coupled to receive a value stored in the associated temporary result register. For example, in Fig. 1, first comparator (C_1) 11a is coupled to receive at its first input 12a input dark compensation sample 9. The samples are obtained from dark compensation pixels located in the image sensor. At its second
10 input 13a comparator 11a is coupled to receive a value stored in temporary result register (T_1) 16a. Each comparator also provides two outputs. The first output is coupled to transmit input to the next comparator and the second output is coupled to transmit input to its associated temporary result register. For example, in Fig. 1, the first comparator (C_1) 11a is coupled at its first output 14a to second comparator (C_2) 11b. At its second
15 output 15a, comparator 11a is coupled to transmit a value to store in temporary result register 16a. Thus, the comparators C_1 through C_k are coupled together by described inputs and outputs, and each temporary result register both receives input from and sends output to the associated comparator. Temporary result register 16k comprises an additional output 18 that is coupled to the final output of ranking circuit 10.

20 The flowchart in Fig. 2 illustrates the process enacted by the automatic dark compensation circuit, which begins in step 20 by initializing the values of the temporary result registers T_1 through T_k to be the largest possible value, e.g. the largest value the registers can hold or the largest possible value for the optical dark level. In the next step,

30, the dark compensation samples are pumped into ranking circuit 10 sequentially as input into comparator C_1 . Step 31 is a determining step, taken simultaneously by all of the comparators C_1 through C_k in the dark compensation circuit. Determining step 31 is depicted in more detail by a flow chart in Fig. 3.

5 Each comparator performs the following determining steps, as illustrated in Fig. 3.

3. As the samples proceed sequentially into each comparator from step 30, the comparator compares the value, s , of the incoming sample to the value, t , stored in the temporary result register. In step 32, if $s > t$, then the value of the sample, s , is output to the next comparator in step 33, and said comparator repeats the determining operation. If

10 s is not greater than t , then process proceeds to step 35, wherein the sample s replaces the value in the temporary result register. Then, in step 37, the old value of the temporary result register is provided as output to the next comparator, which repeats the determining operation. As there is no next comparator following the last comparator C_k , data output through 14k is discarded, as Fig. 2 step 40 illustrates. In this manner the dark

15 compensation circuit orders the dark compensation values of the image sensor, wherein upon completion of the process, the k th smallest dark compensation value is stored in the last temporary result register T_k as desired output of ranking circuit 10. In final step 50, dark compensation circuit 10 provides to output 18 the k th smallest sample from temporary register T_k .

20 In a preferred embodiment, a global reset is provided to quickly reset the tap registers so that the process may be started anew by means of a global reset line added to the circuit.

Additionally, the time required to perform the ranking-based dark compensation method may be altered by varying the number of dark compensation samples and/or the number of comparators in the circuit.

5 Foregoing described embodiments of the invention are provided as illustrations and descriptions. They are not intended to limit the invention to precise form described. In particular, it is contemplated that functional implementation of invention described herein may be implemented equivalently in hardware, software, firmware, and/or other available functional components or building blocks.

10 Other variations and embodiments are possible in light of above teachings, and it is thus intended that the scope of invention not be limited by this Detailed Description, but rather by Claims following.

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